

RIVER OTTER RESTORATION

1800

Prior to Iowa settlement, the river otter was common along major rivers and streams throughout the state. However, otter populations were reduced by a combination of factors including unregulated trapping, stream pollution, and agricultural activities. By the early 1900s there were few otter sightings on Iowa's interior streams. The species was extirpated from most of the state, except for a small remnant otter population along and adjacent to the Mississippi River in northeastern and east central Iowa.

1985

Efforts to restore the river otter to other parts of Iowa began in 1985 when 16 otters (8F,8M) from Louisiana were released at the upper end of Red Rock Reservoir in Marion County. These otters were obtained through a three-way trade in which Iowa DNR provided wild turkeys to Kentucky who, in turn, bought 16 otters from Louisiana to be released in Iowa. Two turkeys were traded for each otter received. Each otter was tagged on both ears and both hind feet for future identification. Radio transmitters were implanted in the otters at Red Rock to monitor movements, mortality, and habitat use.

1989-90

After the apparent success of the initial release, additional otters were released at sites throughout Iowa (Fig. 7.1). Otters were obtained through the same 3-way trade mentioned earlier until 1989. In 1989, the Mitchell County Conservation Board and local schools provided the funds to purchase 8 animals. In 1990, 38 additional otters were release

on the Cedar River in Mitchell County as well as on the Winnebago River in Cerro Gordo County. These releases were funded through local fund-raising efforts and T-shirt sales from the Iowa Trappers Association, Furtakers of Iowa, ISU Fisheries and Wildlife Biology Club and the Iowa DNR.

Between 1985 and 1990, 222 otters were released at 11 sites (Table 7.1). To help reduce trapping mortality, at each release site a portion of the stream was closed to trapping within 10 yards of a beaver lodge or den, since these areas are commonly used by otters. In 1997, this restriction was deemed outdated and, consequently, removed. However, many trappers voluntarily maintained the 10-yard rule.

1997

Two additional sites received otters in 1997. Indian Creek Nature Center in Linn County provided funding for 17 animals, and Chichaqua Wildlife Area in Polk County where the Polk CCB provided funding for 10 animals. Two release sites were added in 1998, both in Cedar Falls. The Black Hawk CCB provided funds for 12 animals. Half were released on the Cedar River at Hartman Reserve Nature Center and the remaining 6 were released on the other side of the Cedar River at George Wyth State Park. In 1999, no animals were purchased from Louisiana for release. From 1985-1999, 261 Louisiana River Otters have been released into Iowa's rivers and lakes.

1999-2000

Otter populations in several localized sites across the state are experiencing roadkills and incidental

trappings. The Iowa DNR wanted to determine the viability of these localized “hot spots” by trapping some of the animals and monitoring the population changes at both site of capture and the site of release. In 1999, 5 otters were translocated from the Des Moines River in Boone County to Peterson Pits along the Skunk River in Story County. An additional 3 otters were translocated from the Little Sioux River in Buena Vista County to the Boyer River in Sac County.

2000-2001

During the fall and winter of 2000-2001, 5 additional otters were released to Buena Vista County Boyer River Site. Five were captured and released on the East Nishnabotna River near Audubon. Three were captured and released at Miami Lakes in Monroe County. Two were released on Cedar Creek east of Albia. During the fall and winter of 2001-2002, 5 more otters were captured and released on the East Nishnabotna River near Audubon. The Iowa River Greenbelt Trust also funded the release of 11 river otters to the Iowa River at the Hardin City Access near Steamboat in 2000-01. The DNR delisted the river otter from the threatened list in 2001.

2001-2002

In 2001-02, a record 32 additional river otters were trapped and released at other sites across the state. (Table 7.1)

During the winter of 2000-2001, otter teeth to determine population age

structure and otter reproductive tracts have been collected from nearly 150 river otter carcasses. Evaluation of these and continued collections will take place in 2001-2004. The documentation request for a river otter season has currently been requested from the Scientific Authority of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Our goal is to have a limited river otter harvest season by no later than 2005.

Otter releases have been monitored by searching for tracks, mudslides, snow slides, and by soliciting observations from DNR and CCB personnel, and the public. Thus far, the results are encouraging; otters have been observed at all release sites and in over 90 counties across the state. Reproduction has been documented in over 75 of Iowa's 99 counties (figure 7.1). Major mortality causes are incidental trapping and roadkills. The goal of the otter restoration project is to have statewide distribution and ultimately some type of regulated otter harvest season.

As the otter population increases, we are beginning to get a few otter depredation complaints, particularly in farm ponds. Some fishery interests are also showing mild concern of otter predation on certain localized rivers and streams.

Areas in southern Iowa have apparently benefited from otter releases in Missouri. Areas in southern Minnesota are benefiting from Iowa releases. Nearly everyone closely associated with furbearer resources in Iowa believe the Iowa River Otters are doing extremely well.

Table 7.1 River otter release sites in Iowa, 1985 – 1999.

Year	Males	Females	County	Nearest Town	River / Area
1985	8	8	Marion	Runnells	Red Rock Reservoir
1986	10	10	Tama	Chelsea	Otter Creek WMA
1986	10	10	Hamilton	Stratford	Boone River
1986	10	10	Guthrie	Guthrie Center	Springbrook Park
1987	10	10	Clay	Peterson	Little Sioux River
1987	10	10	Lucas	Russell	Rathbun Reservoir
1988	10	10	Bremer	Tripoli	Sweet Marsh WMA
1988	10	10	Linn	Waubeek	Wapsipinicon River
1988	10	10	Montgomery	Morton Mills	Nodaway
1989	5	3	Mitchell	Otranto	Cedar River
1990	7	8	Mitchell	Otranto	Cedar River
1990	13	10	Cerro Gordo	Mason City	Winnebago River
1997	9	8	Linn	Cedar Rapids	Indian Creek
1997	6	6	Polk	Chichaqua	Skunk River
1998	7	5	Black Hawk	Cedar Falls	Cedar River
1999	5 sex unknown		Story	Ames	Skunk River
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1999	3 sex unknown		Sac	Reiff Park	Boyer River
2000	5 sex unknown		Sac	Reiff Park	Boyer River
2000	5 sex unknown		Audubon	Audubon	Nishnabotna River
2000	3 sex unknown		Monroe	Miami Lake	Miami Lake
2000	2 sex unknown		Wapello	Cedar Creek	Cedar Creek
2001	5 sex unknown		Audubon	Audubon	Nishnabotna River
2001	11 sex unknown		Hardin	Steamboat Rock	Iowa River
2002	3 sex unknown		Hardin	Steamboat Rock	Iowa River
2002	2 sex unknown		Clayton	Eldorado	Turkey River
2002	4 sex unknown		Pottawattamie	Oakland	W. Nishnabotna River
2002	2 sex unknown		Marion	Hamilton	North Cedar Creek
2002	2 sex unknown		Cass	Atlantic	E. Nishnabotna River
2002	5 sex unknown		Poweshiek	Brooklyn	English River
2002	14 sex unknown		Worth	Northwood	Shellrock River

Grand Total Males and Females = 334

*To coincide with the capture of otters to translocate during the trapping season succeeding years as listed.

Figure 7.1 Status and distribution of river otters in Iowa as of 2001.



